

Psychologists put on cyber coats to rescue people caught in a 'web'

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The call came from Aurangabad. A distraught Reena, once a happy and dedicated wife and mother of two, had over the past year become irritable and uninterested in her family. She was lost online every day, stalking a male friend she had bonded with. Reena's obsession crossed over to depression when an untoward remark from her friend morphed into a personal attack.

Reena eventually opened up about her online fixation to Nirali Bhatia, a cyber psychologist. With some counselling, Reena came away "psychoeducated" about online etiquette and consequences of putting all your faith into a fleeting medium.

"Reena's case was a cross between psychological distress and addictive Internet use," explains Bhatia who is among a handful of mental health experts in the city who identify themselves as 'cyber psychologists'. "One may not get a degree in it, but can apply psychological theory of motivation, resilience, neuropsychology to study people's interface with the virtual world," says Anuradha Sovani, psychologist and head of the psychology department at SNDT Women's University.

Bhatia recently counselled a young couple on the verge of divorce after the wife was found cheating. Facebook had thrown a wrench in the marriage. "Be-

MOST KIDS SURF UNMONITORED

A study conducted on 1,200 kids revealed user trends, knowledge about safe online usage and cyber safety

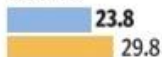
Most preferred social platforms

■ For girls ■ For boys

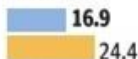
Whatsapp



Youtube



Facebook



Instagram



Snapchat



Figures in %

- Internet access among kids starts at as early as 5 years of age; 10 yrs is the average age of introduction to Internet
- 80% browse without supervision. Unmonitored access began at age 10
- Less than 40% aware of 'cyber bullying' and 'cyber pornography'
- Over 94% felt the need for cyber safety in their academic curriculum



cause the husband had long hours at work and the wife kept herself busy chatting and playing games online; she couldn't leave her phone even when they were together," says Bhatia.

Addiction—once a keyword for drugs, sex and alcohol—now spans the virtual world. What is worrying is that it is often passed off as a modern-day distraction. With more freedom and less control over oneself, the sense of urgency is escalating, points out Sovani. "People do

not look at each other enough, miss body language and facial cues, and are misled by cues portrayed online," she says.

Ahaan Foundation, a Thane-based trust, organized a two-day National Cyber Psychology Conference in Mumbai earlier this year which brought together mental health professionals and educators. "The topics ranged from Internet-based games and intimate relationships to addiction, bullying and e-healing," said Sonali Patankar, pre-

sident, Ahaan Foundation.

The term cyber-psychology is not confined to the Internet but refers to anything digital. "Incidentally, its advent can be traced back to the application of human psychology to solve electronic crimes that began to proliferate with the emergence of dot com," says Viren Aul, group director of Cyber Council.

Doctors in Mumbai say that the number of people seeking help with excessive cyber use and bullying had seen a "five time increase" over the last three years. "Especially for 12 to 40-year-olds, the Internet has become a way to overcome peer pressure, stress, relationship problems, boredom and loneliness and we have no choice but expand our psychiatric resources. Using the term 'cyber-psychologist' makes us more accessible to people who need help but don't know how," reasons psychologist Harish Shetty.

Still nascent and under-researched, the job of a cyber-psychologist calls for high alert. "We're in a stage of doing this experientially without a structured protocol. It's based on qualitative data," says Shetty, who inhabits social media spaces to study online behaviour patterns. People's online fixations can bear tell-tale distress signs in physical world. "A young professional's feverish action on social media drew my attention. It seemed he was trying to overcome humiliation at workplace."

